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SUBJECT: COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS UPDATES DCM ON RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENTS

REF: A) HANOI 2245; B) HCMC 1534; C) HCMC 987; D) HANOI 1466

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Summary and Comment

1. (SBU) On September 15, Chairman Ngo Yen Thi of the GVN's Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) briefed the DCM on recent religious freedom developments in Vietnam. The CRA reports that eighteen congregations have been chosen in five out of 19 northern provinces for "pilot registration." These successful registrations will be described to local officials from throughout the north as positive examples of acceptance of religion at a large CRA-organized meeting in September. According to Chairman Thi, the registration process in the north will likely speed up following this meeting, as happened in the Central Highlands in 2006. He cited local officials' ignorance about religion and the failure of northern Protestant leaders to engage with officials and believers at the local level for the need for this step-by-step approach. Thi stated that northern Protestant leaders did not have direct contact with even the 150 "mature" congregations on a list presented to government officials. He blamed municipal authorities for the lack of progress in opening a Bible school in Hanoi. We will raise the issue of the Hanoi land-use certificate with the appropriate city authorities.

2. (SBU) Summary and Comment, cont'd: The CRA has not officially established a central point of contact for Protestants to raise their problems with the GVN, but one well-connected pastor reports that a back channel point of contact for Protestants may have been created within the Ministry of Public Security. The news that CRA is moving ahead with 18 pilot registrations is welcome and would constitute more than a doubling of registered northern churches, if true, although Protestants in Hanoi have not been able to confirm the news. They will attempt to confirm these registrations directly with the respective house church leaders. For their part, the Protestants report that they recently acquired a copy of CRA's policy on northern Protestantism, which explicitly recognizes the faith (a step forward) though it instructs local officials to encourage some ethnic minority believers to return to traditional beliefs. Nevertheless, all Protestant congregations across the north are able to gather for worship regularly and do not report any official harassment. End Summary and Comment.

Protestant Registrations

3. (SBU) The DCM met with CRA Chairman Ngo Yen Thi on September 15 to follow up on Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang's recent letter to U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford detailing religious freedom developments in Vietnam. Thi noted that the CRA had received the list of 150 "mature" (and hence

easily registered) H'Mong house church congregations in nine Northwest provinces identified by the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) (Ref A - Paragraph 3). The CRA has been seeking to verify the existence of these congregations with the respective provincial authorities. This is proving difficult because of the remoteness of most of the congregations, as well as local officials' confusion over which organizations the Protestants are actually affiliated with, i.e., the ECVN, the Baptists, the 7th Day Adventists, the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and so on. The provincial officials are also attempting to gather information from each of the identified congregations confirming their leadership and number of adherents, he said.

¶4. (SBU) Thi explained that the CRA decided to move ahead with eighteen pilot registrations in five provinces in the north (Ref A).

Even these proved labor-intensive and time-consuming, according to Thi, as a CRA official must travel to the respective locality in order to familiarize local officials and local Protestants with the registration procedures for each registration. The CRA plans to highlight these registrations to "prove to northern officials that Protestantism is purely a religious phenomenon" (rather than a separatist movement). The CRA will convene a meeting in late September with officials from all of the northern provinces. Representatives of the five provinces with pilot registrations will present reports on their successes in registering Protestant groups so that "the others will understand and will build" on the pilot experiences to help their own Protestant residents to register. Thi also noted that the CRA is using radio and pamphlets to educate local Protestants (and local officials) about the registration process, though not every community in the mountainous areas can receive radio broadcasts.

¶5. (SBU) Thi stated that the CRA's plan for northern Vietnam is designed to replicate its successful experience in the Central Highlands last year. During 2005, CRA officers had to persuade local officials (provincial, district and commune level) that, "though there are bad people among the believers, most believers are

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good and should be allowed to register." Once this was achieved, the Central Highlands registration process sped up significantly. Today, there are 700 registered meeting points and 63 registered full-blown congregations in the Central Highlands, with 14 churches built or under construction, Thi added. However, he acknowledged that though the CRA expects that after the September meeting of provincial officials there will be a strong increase in registrations in the north, the process will still likely be slower than occurred in the Central Highlands.

¶6. (SBU) Thi asserted that the main reason the CRA expects slower registration is that the ECVN "is currently not as involved" with local congregations and local officials as the SECV was in the Central Highlands last year. The ECVN executive board members do not go to the provinces to train house church leaders; they just stay in Hanoi, he complained. (Note: ECVN leaders have told us before that they repeatedly have requested, and been denied, permission to travel to the provinces to engage local leaders and local Protestants in discussion about registration and other matters concerning the local house churches. In general, this permission would be granted by provincial officials, not by central authorities based in Hanoi. End Note.)

Seminaries

¶7. (SBU) The DCM noted that ECVN complains that the CRA cites lack of trained pastors and poor penetration of ECVN into the mountains of the north, yet had failed to grant ECVN permission to build a Bible school in Hanoi on the ECVN Hanoi Church property to train church leaders. Thi replied by noting that the SECV recently convened three training courses for pastors in Ho Chi Minh City and also recently received a piece of land for a new bible school (Ref C). When pressed, Thi stated that the CRA hopes to replicate this success with the ECVN in Hanoi, but the process for approving the new Bible school has been slow because: (a) the ECVN does not have enough trained pastors to teach new church leaders, but also

because: (b) the Hanoi authorities have been slow to approve the land use certificate for the church property.

Point of Contact for Protestants with Problems

18. (SBU) The DCM asked if CRA has established a single point of contact for Protestants who have problems with registration to inform the GVN about their concerns over registration. Thi replied that in each province there is a provincial CRA which should be the main point of contact for Protestants who run into trouble with their applications. (Note: On September 15, Poloff met with Pastor Doan Trung Tin, a.k.a Pastor Steven, of the Vietnam Good News Mission. Steven, who assists ECVN's church organizing activities in the north, stated that on September 12, two members of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) invited him to a meeting at which they informed him that they had been assigned as troubleshooters for Protestants across Vietnam. The MPS officers said that if Steven and other ECVN representatives come to them with Protestants' problems, the officers will do their best to assist them from within MPS. However, the officers also warned that if the Protestant leaders report problems to foreigners, the MPS "will not do anything to assist them," Steven said. End Note).

Official Responses to ECVN's Petitions to GVN Leadership

19. (SBU) The DCM asked if the GVN contemplates responding to the ECVN's petitions to GVN leaders for redress of a host of issues, including registration of churches, permission to open a Bible school, issuance of land-use certificates and so on. Thi acknowledged that the CRA has received several petitions from the ECVN throughout the last year, and has forwarded each request within those petitions to the appropriate ministries, city officials or provincial officials for comment. He reiterated that issuance of the Hanoi land-use certificate (which is also delaying the establishment of the ECVN's proposed Bible school) is under the responsibility of the Hanoi People's Committee which, he suggested, is "difficult to work with."

Other Developments

10. (SBU) Thi noted that on September 15, in Da Nang, the CRA registered a United World Mission Church (Ref B). The Ho Chi Minh City CRA also recently recognized Baptist, Mennonite, 7th Adventist organizations and a new Buddhist organization. This shows that Vietnam is open to permitting new religions to develop. Any delay in Protestant registration in northern Vietnam should be seen as the result of local ignorance, and not any official GVN policy, Thi added.

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Details on Pilot Registrations

11. (SBU) The CRA provided the following breakdown of the list of eighteen pilot registrations by province as follows (note: the six Lai Chau and Lao Cai registrations are the same six previously reported by the CRA - Ref D):

I - Lai Chau Province

- 1) Cung Mu Phin village, Lan Nhi Thang commune, Tam Duong district;
- 2) Than Chi Ho village, Hong Thu commune, Sin Ho district;

II - Lao Cai Province

- 3) Khe Den I village, Thai Nien commune, Bao Thang district;
- 4) Khe Pen II village, Thai Nien commune, Bao Thang district;
- 5) Ai Nam village, Phong Hai township, Bao Thang district;
- 6) Xin Chai village, Phong Hai township, Bao Thang district;

III - Bac Can Province

- 7) Phja Deng village, Nghien Loan commune, Pac Nam district;
- 8) Na Phai village, Nghien Loan commune, Pac Nam district;
- 9) Khuoi O village, Nhan Mon commune, Pac Nam district;
- 10) Nam Nha village, Xuan La commune, Pac Nam district;

IV - Yen Bai Province

- 11) Go Xoan village, Chau Que Thuong commune, Van Yen district;
- 12) Khe San village, Chau Que Thuong commune, Van Yen district;
- 13) Lien Son village, Lang Thip commune, Van Yen district;

V - Thai Nguyen Province

- 14) Choi Hong village, Tan Lang commune, Vo Nhai district;
- 15) Lung Hoai village, Thuong Nung commune, Vo Nhai district;
- 16) Dong Tam village, Dong Dat commune, Phu Luong district;
- 17) Tan Linh village, Tan Linh commune, Dai Tu district;
- 18) Hoang Van Thu precinct, Thai Nguyen city.

Protestant Reaction

¶12. (SBU) On September 19, ECVN General Secretary Au Quang Vinh told Poloff that the ECVN has not heard any confirmation from the 18 congregations that the CRA says were included in its pilot registration. He is sending requests for full reports from the leaders of the respective house church leaders of the congregations on the list, but does not expect to hear back from them before the end of September. (Note: All messages back and forth from these congregations are hand carried and require at least several days travel one way. End Note.)

¶13. (SBU) Vinh noted that the ECVN has not been contacted by the CRA on any issue since Ambassador Hanford's August 16-18 visit to Hanoi, nor have they received any written response to their past petitions. Poloff informed Vinh of the CRA's complaint that ECVN leaders have not been engaged at the local level in the north. Vinh stated that the ECVN board will formally request permission from CRA and provincial officials to visit local communities across the north over the next two weeks. The ECVN will inform post of any response.

¶14. (SBU) Vinh also stated that he recently acquired a copy of the internal CRA policy manual on northern Protestantism, dated "Hanoi - 2006". ECVN leaders believe that this document is a step forward as it explicitly recognizes the existence and importance of Protestantism amidst the H'mong and Dzao ethnic minority communities of the Northwest Highlands, and also explicitly forbids local officials to force believers to renounce their faiths. That said, the document still instructs local officials to encourage ethnic minority believers to return to their traditional beliefs. (Note: Post is not certain of the provenance of this document and will continue to investigate with CRA. End Note). Nevertheless, Vinh stated that he is pleased with the current situation in the north for ECVN followers and noted that all of the 1,070 ECVN ethnic minority congregations are able to gather for worship regularly and do not report any harassment from police or other local officials.

Comment

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¶15. (SBU) Thi was at pains to demonstrate progress in line with VFM Bang's recent letter to Ambassador Hanford, but he also clearly sought to manage our expectations for immediate results over the next few weeks. The news that the CRA is moving ahead with 18 pilot registrations is welcome and would constitute more than a doubling of the number of registered ECVN churches, if true. We will continue to seek ECVN confirmation of these registrations directly

from the respective house church leaders. Pastor Stevens claims that several of the 18 were issued registration certificates by provincial authorities, but that commune level officials continue to refuse to pass the certificates to congregations until they "demonstrate good behavior." We also plan to raise the issue of ECVN's Hanoi land use certificate with the appropriate Hanoi officials as soon as possible. End Comment.

¶16. (SBU) Begin text of VFM Le Van Bang's Letter to Ambassador Hanford:

September 13, 2006

H.E. John Hanford III
Ambassador at-large for
International Religious Freedom
U.S. Department of State
Washington DC

Dear Mr. Ambassador,

I am pleased with the outcome of your visit to Vietnam last August. I believe that you may have a clear picture of the current situation of religions in Vietnam through your meetings with various Vietnamese agencies, religious dignitaries as well as through what you have seen by your own eyes. In order to further enhance mutual understanding between Vietnam and the United States, I would like to update you with current developments in this regard, especially since the coming into effect of the Ordinance on Religions and Beliefs, the Government Decree No. 22 and Prime Minister's Instruction No. 1 on Protestantism.

Since the promulgation of Prime Minister's Instruction, three new Protestant denominations in the Ho Chi Minh City area (Seven Day Adventist Church, Grace Baptist Church and Mennonite Church) and a new one in Danang (United World Mission) have been registered. In the Central Highlands, additional 34 chapters of the Vietnam Evangelical Church (South) have been recognized, nearly 800 groups from Protestant denominations registered, 67 pastors ordained. Local authorities have granted the use of land and facilitated the construction of 9 new churches in the region.

In Northern mountainous provinces, efforts have been made on the part of local authorities to implement the new legislations on religions. Within only two months from July to September, 18 Protestant groups have been registered in Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Bac Can, Yen Bai and Thai Nguyen. Application by other groups are under consideration. The Commission on Religious Affairs has held a number of training courses on new legislations for local officials.

Buddhism and Catholicism have witnessed a number of significant activities since late 2005, one of which was the historical visit by Vatican's Minister Cardinal C. Sepe who oversaw the ordainment ceremony for 57 priests in Hanoi Cathedral. Buddhist community nationwide has just celebrated the 25th Anniversary of its unification and the 2550th Vesak (Buddha's Birthday) this June.

On occasion of the National Day of September 2nd, 2006, 5,351 inmates were granted amnesty, including those of concern to the U.S. such as Pham Hong Son and Ma Van Bay.

I know that the Vietnamese Government Commission for Religious Affairs regularly updates you with new developments. By citing the above-mentioned figures, however, I would like to stress that much progress has been made just within nearly two years since the religious legal documents came into life.

In the time to come, we will continue to attach great importance to the implementation of the Government policy on religions from central to local levels with more attention paid to remote areas. In this respect, we take note and consider with care issues raised by you and the US Embassy in Hanoi recently. We will update you with information relating to those issues as soon as we can. With what we have done and experience gained over the last nearly 2 years of implementing the legislations on religions, I can assure you that much more progress will be made. At the same time, I would like to confirm our willingness to conduct dialogues with the United States on issues of concern, including human rights and religious freedom

on the basis of mutual respect with an aim to further enhance our

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mutual understanding as well as to look for the best solutions to these issues.

In that spirit and in keeping with the current relations between Vietnam and the United States, I urge you to recommend the U.S. Secretary of State to remove Vietnam from the CPC list, which in our

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belief, does not reflect the real situation of Religions and beliefs in Vietnam. As President Bush stated in his recent letter to President Nguyen Minh Triet, we're opening a new chapter in the friendship between our two countries. We should work closely together to take our relationship in that direction.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Le Van Bang
Vice Minister for
Foreign Affairs

CC: H.E. Christopher Hill
Assistant Secretary for
East Asia and Pacific Affairs
U.S. Department of State
Washington DC

Ambassador Michael Marine
U.S. Embassy Hanoi
Hanoi, Vietnam

End text of letter.

MARINE